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Women As Rebels: A Study Of The Works Of Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi's (1926) female women in her stories are the victims of caste, class and gender exploitation. The image of woman that emerges is that of a mere tradition tossed toy, crushed under the wheel of a conservation, state and exploitation society. But this is just one side of her female protagonists. Her stories Rudali, Draupadi, Hunt and Dhouli present women who are quite vulnerable to injustice but are not mere wooden and spineless creatures; they endure and resist the brunt of socio-economic oppression and violence with indomitable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age old structures of gender discrimination. They protest against the hypocritical moral attitude and authority to free them to a status, where they may articulate their individual urge and assert their identity. According to Mahasweta Devi women have strong and have hideous flexibility. In an interview given to Gabrielle Collu, she opinions, 'Women are generally, even in the middle class, women are generally much stronger than men are. They can take a lot ... Women are strong' (225) and this is clearly reflected in her stories.

Although, at the outset they seems to confirm to the existing values, they march ahead with an indomitable will of rebel and embrace martyrdom in the pursuit of their identity that forms the core of her entire creation. According to Harivinder Mann Mahasweta's stories focus upon, 'The fragmented resistance mounted by low caste women...' (132).

Mahasweta's action of Draupadi in her story 'Draupadi' is a befitting example of a prey finally victimizing her one time victimizer. This extremely shocking, powerful and innovative tale reveals the revolutionary zeal of the literate Santhal woman Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen, who raises her voice against extreme torture and atrocities inflicted on the tribals. Mahasweta has reinterpreted the episode of *chirharan* of Draupadi, the most celebrated female protagonist of Indian epic the Mahabharata in order to expose its inherent semiotics of subjugation. Draupadi in the epic is married to the five Pandava brothers and is said to be responsible for the Great War in Mahabharata. She is treated as an object and is used to demonstrate male power and glory. Gayatri Chakravorty comments that Draupadi's 'Legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory...' (BS 10). Her eldest husband Yudhistara puts her at a stake in a game of dice and loses her. She is violently dragged by the hair in front of the assembly of men. One of the Kauravas, Dussasana tries to dishonor her by pulling off her sari but she could not be stripped to shamelessness for Lord Krishna rises to her rescue. The attempt to strip Draupadi is a symbol of women's humiliation, harassment and violence.

On the contrary, Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' set against the Naxalbari movement of 1967-72 focus upon the dismemberment and protest of a tribal woman. Dopdi in the story is a fierce and proud santhal tribal woman who behaves like a man, drinks smokes. She has created a stir among military authorities that is a massive hunt for her. It was a trouble time in Birbhum. There was draught and Surja Sahu with the help of Bidi Babu digs two tubewells and three wells within the compound of his two houses. There is '...unlimited, water

at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as a cow's eye' (29) but Dopdi and her low-caste brethren are forbidden to draw water from the wells of the upper caste like Surja Sahu.

Caught in such excruciating situation Dulan, husband of Dopdi, and other comrade fight for water and kill Sujata Saju. The narrative ironically explicates that the people who are fighting against injustice for a better tomorrow are terrorists in the eyes of government and the whole military operation is carried out for their hunt. After killing Surja Sahu, Dopadi and Dulna escape into 'Neanderthal Darkness' (20) of forest Jharkani for a long time throwing dust in the army's eye. There is a price of hundred rupees on Dopdi's head and even a police dossier. The couple's unflinching commitment scares many an officers out of his wits and the guerrilla war continues. But they are betrayed and Dopdi's husband Dulan is killed. The story upholds the truth that neither the death of Dulan nor the fear of tortures desist the committed persons like Dopdi from fighting for the common good. Moreover, Dulan's death makes her stronger and gives a new direction to her struggle. Her dauntless spirit is revealed in her reply to Mushai Tudu's wife when she warns her. She says, 'No tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will Kounter me. Let them' (28). She knows that they are brutally treated by people police after being arrested as she reflects, 'When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound...' (28) but even this does not deter her from her fight.

Dopdi's actions caused a war scare among the army persons and the hunt for her is intensified. 'It is a carbuncle on the government backside. Not to be cured by the tested ointment, not to burst with the appropriate herb...' (25). Consequently every village, 'where the hungry and naked are still defiant and irrepressible...' (26) becomes the target of the army. Finally, with the help of the tactics employed by Senanayak, the Bengali army officer, Dopdi, while acting as a courier is arrested by the army. Dopdi rather than being afraid valiantly readies

herself for her defeat. She performs her responsibility of warning readies herself for her defeat. She performs her responsibility of warning others of the danger:

Now Dopdi spreads her arms raises her face to sky, turns towards the forest, ululates with the force of her entire being, Once, twice three time, At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flaps at their wings. The echo of the call travels far. (34)

The way Dopdi encounters her oppressors gives this story a new and unique dimension. She is cross-interrogated for an hour but she remains firm and does not utter a word. Then Senanayak commands the soliders, 'Make her, Do the needful' (34). Dopdi now becomes the victim of multiple rapes. The process of making her, continues till dawn for everyone in the camp is allowed to pacify his animal desire: 'The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall over it'. (35) She is dismembered. The barbarous attacked on her chastity is not only a sign of insult to the dignity of an individual but also a threat to the human values. In a patriarchal society, rape is synonymous with the power of manhood and is associated with the feeling of guilt and shame. But what distinguished Mahasweta's Dopdi from other raped women is that rape does not diminish her. There are no counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in her. Gayatri Spivak says, 'Dopdi is what the Draupdi-written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power-could not be ...'(BS 11). While Draupdi in the epic pleads for help, Mahasweta's Dopdi does not. She does not howl or behave like a helpless victim; rather her ravaged and tortured body becomes a weapon for her.

Her morning when it is time to lead her to the Burra Sahib's tent, she refuses to put on her clothes. The guard tries to drape her cloth. She walks naked towards Senanayak in the bright sunlight, very uplifted and sure. She shakes with an indomitable laughter and in terrifying voice says, 'What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me

again? Are you a man?’ (36) The most sacred virtue for a woman is her chastity and when that is plundered there is nothing more insistence. Her nakedness becomes an affront to the masculinity of the attackers. Dopdi says:

There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me-come on, kounter me-?

Draupadi pushes Senanyak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (36-37)

Though according to Spivak the narrative ends in ‘...the culmination of her political punishment by the representative of the law...’ (BS 11), Dopdi in reality remains unconquered. Her defiance is an infallible challenge to the male dominated upon women where shame, honour and bodily control are concerned. She simultaneously transcends all societal limits imposed upon women where shame, honour and bodily control are concerned. She refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as subject and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence and constructs a meaning which ‘Senanayak simply cannot understand’ (36). Thus, unlike mythical Draupdi Mahasweta’s Dopdi becomes which resists male knowledge, power and glory and thereby redefines the patriarchal ideological construct of female honour and modesty.

Furthermore, Mohasweta’s Rudali is also a saga of survival, protest and empowerment of a low caste woman against all odds. It is a continuing battle of Sanichari against all odds. It is a continuing battle of Sanichari against naked poverty due to shameless exploitation. In an interview given to Anjum Kaatyal Mahasweta says, ‘Rudali is about ... how to survive ...bread and mouth. It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this’ (*Rudali* 9). The entire text is a critique of the socio-economic and religious and systems and the link between them. *Rudali* centers on Sanichari, a poor woman. The first part of the part of the

narrative presents her utter desolate state and hardships. For Sanichari mourning for her mother-in-law, husband and son is a luxury because she has to procure the wherewithal for their last rites:

When he mother-in-law dies, Sanichari didn't cry. At that time, her husband and her brother, both the old woman's sons, were in jail because of malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he had all the young dushad and ganjumaes of the village locked up....(55-55)

When her husband died she was so hard pressed to feed her little son that she never had any time to cry. Moreover, the death of her husband forced her to become a bonded laborer as she had to borrow 20 rupees from Ramavatar to perform the *Shradh* of her husband. When her husband died, again she did not had time to cry because she had to look after Budhna's son as her daughter-in-law left the house and son behind. The misery and the bitter experience of injustice dehumanize the subjects to a state of insensitivity. The daily struggle under exploitation and the everyday realities of injustice and double standers degrade and dehumanize women like Sanichari. That is why Sanichari, like the vast majority of women in India is presented as unemotional, bereft of her intimate emotions and tears. 'Their grief must have hardened into stone within them! To herself, Sanichari had signed with relief. Is it possible to feed so many mouths on meager scrapings they bring home after laboring on the stomachs would be full.'(55)

Through so many deaths in Sanichari's family and her struggle for their burial and performance of rituals after death, Mahasweta tries to expose the stranglehold of social and economic oppression caused by rigid religious rituals. To people like Sanichari's religion offers no succor or solace. On the contrary, religion further impoverishes an obligation. Religion controls them only through fear and superstitions. When Sanichari's mother-in-law dies, at

night, in the pouring rain Sanichari is obliged to carry out the necessary rituals before day break, with no grain in the house, and no men folk to help lay out the body. 'There was no crying over those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbors cheaply at the *shradh*?' (55). When her husband dies the panda of the Shiva temple at Tohri demands that she makes ritual offerings before returning to her village. Even a meager offering of sand and *sattu* costs her a precious rupee and a quarter. And once she returns to her village, Mohanlal the priest of Ramavastar's presiding deity, scolds- 'Can a Tohri Brahman know how a Tahad villager's *kriya* is done? By obeying him you've insulted your local priest!' (57) To appease him she has to repeat the offerings for which she has to repeat the offerings for which she is forced into debt to Ramavastar. Sanichari's life internalizes material misery and exploitation and death in detail with all their attendant degradation.

However, the dominant streak of Sanichari's character is that she is not weighted down by her dire poverty, the burden of ritualized religion and even the absolute power of the malik-mahajans. She struggles to survive against heavy odds and remains dignified in her poverty, as she understands, 'Everything in this life is a battle' (74). The later part of the narrative offers an account of Sanichari's taking up of 'rudali' or 'funeral wailing' as her profession. Mahasweta ironically highlights that if sorrow is controlled by the malik-mahajans, tears can be skillfully used as a produce, a source of earning by professional mourners. Convinced that the most important criterion distinguishing virtue from sin was whether it helped put food in hungry stomachs, Sanichari at the suggestion of Dulan and support of her childhood friends Bikhni picks up the funeral wailing business. Tears become her means of livelihood she realizes, 'that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time' (72). Sanichari rises to the occasion of historical dissent.

Gradually she gains confidence and becomes a well-known 'rudali'. She seems to have learnt her lesson well. She negotiates boldly with her maliks manipulating the situation

cunningly. She moves on to organize other prostitutes as funeral wailers. She invites two ex-village girls Parbatia and Gulbadan to join them and emphasizes that this profession will stand them in good stead when like her they age and other means of livelihood fail them in good stead when like her they age and other means of livelihood fail them. She leads her groups to countless that 'those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige...' (74). She realizes that it is at a bad thing to let some of that money come into her home. She bargains hard for her group and her masters have no choice but 'to agree to Sanichari's demands' (75).

Raped and reduced by Rajput landlords and creditors to market-place prostitutes, these tribal low caste women are offered a means of material sustenance as well as resistance by Sanichari's funeral wailing business. Sanichari can now truly claim on behalf her whole community, 'The malik now belongs to us' (91). It is significant here that after having been owned by Rajputs for over two hundred years and after all social and sexual harassment, according to Harvinder Maan, 'The tribals and untouchable women of Tohri in *Rudali* revolt not through armed uprising or electoral ballot but through the domestic organization of women as funeral wailers' (136). Anjum Katyal also views that the custom of *Rudali* is 'a subaltern tool of revenge...' (23).

The ritualized, commercialized system of lamentation remains not only a means of survival but also becomes an instrument of empowerment. 'Rudali' thus showcases Sanichari's survival and growing empowerment. The Sanichari, one encounters at the end of the tale outgoing, shrewd, manipulative is very different from the stoic, repressed, victimized women one meet earlier. Rudali empowered in the end offers to empower others also. Women's resistance again finds focus in the short story 'The Hunt' which is a straightforward narrative of a woman who is a victim of male sexual aggression and avenges her oppressive plight by killing her oppressor, According to Wenzel the story is a perfect example of 'gendered

subaltern autonomy and resistance...'(181). It focuses upon the life of Mary Oraon, the illegitimate daughter of an Australian white man and a tribal woman, whom Mahasweta claims to have seen personally. She tells Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon...'(*IM* xi).

Mary is a violent, self-righteous, strong and charming woman. She has financial autonomy and unimpeded mobility. She travels freely and regularly to the nearby market town of Thori to sell the estate's produce, as well as her own women. She chooses to marry Jalim, a Muslim trader in Thori who once protected her from fight. Her hybridity allows her to move from and through culturally, in a way unavailable to even the high caste family, who currently own the estate. 'Everyone is afraid of Mary' (4). Her mixed blood is repeatedly identified as the source of her power. When Mary raises her knife in defense of her right to forest produce, or sets the terms her machete in defence of her right to forest produce, or sets the terms of her relationship with Jalim, 'it figures white blood or the power of Australian blood'(3). Mary understands the advantages of the singularity of her position, she had 'resembled any Oraon girl' (5); she would not be free to come and go to Tohri, nor to attach to Jalim. Through deep in her heart she dreams of being totally accepted by her community: 'In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad, if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage...' (5) This brave woman is harassed and stalked by Tehsildar, a logging contractor. She decides to stop this obnoxious man from harassing her on the occasion of Jani Parab, the tribals celebrate the annual hunt festival. It is also their Festival of Justice as after custom gender roles are reversed once every twelve years when on the occasion of annual hunt festival women take their turn at the hunt. They go hunting and dink and dance like men. (*IM* xi)

On the night of Jani Parab, Mary Oraon first provokes Tehsildar Singh and when he approaches her in the hope of sexual union, she displays her fierce, indomitable spirit and hacks

him to death like a beast with her inseparable machete. Tehsildar is equivalent to beast in Mary's mind, a beast to be hunted down and killed. In her final act of self-preservation she transforms herself into a predator and with the help of her machete kills 'the biggest beast' (17). Thus in the story in a dramatic reversal the hunter becomes the prey. Moreover in killing Tehsildar Mary Oraon resurrects the real meaning of the festival by seeking the personal revenge as well as bringing the offender to justice for destroying her precious forest. As discussed earlier the narrative of 'Dhouli'. It represents Dhouli as a collective metaphor of the subaltern women's powerlessness in the modern Indian nation, but the majority of the story traces Dhouli's attempt to survive. The narrative puts forward a radical pattern of gendered resistance through Dhouli's defiance. Dhouli has to suffer because of her love for Brahmin son Misrilal but resisting the impulse to locate herself in the position of victim, she also actively rejects the option of aborting her baby, electing to raise her son even in the face of extreme material deprivation. Finally, challenging traditional sexual morality, which regards chastity as a women's most cherished possession, she chooses to live as a prostitute rather than to die because of her sexual dishonor.

When Misrilal argues that rather than becoming a whore she should have killed herself, she boldly asserts: 'You left after you'd had your fun your elder brother tried to kill us by denying us food ...I tried to kill myself. But then I thought why should I? You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself? Why? Why? Why?' (31) By making Dhouli survive, Mahasweta seems to empower the exploited subaltern.

Mahasweta's raped women Dropdi or Dhouli are not presented as helpless victim. She gives them a strong voice of protest. By presenting the raped women as one who becomes subject through rape rather than as merely one subjected to its violence and by structuring post rape narratives that trace their strategies of survival she challenges patriarchal textual models that reify female victimization and reduce the violation women to a symbolical cause.

In the light of above critical detailed analysis of Mahasweta Devi's fiction it can be concluded that her robust sense of realities derived from her visits to tribal areas on the one hand and her penetrating literary sensibility on the other, she has succeeds in articulating the range of problems faced by Indian marginalized women. In thought-provoking novels and stories she deals with those aspects women's lives that have been erased, ignored demeaned and mystified. The writer has tried to comprehend the social and psychic mechanism that construct class, cast and gender inequalities. Her discourses on women are examples in which the gendered subalterns are fictional representation of the community of other, marginalized along cast and gender lines. Almost all the Mahasweta Devi's female protagonists articulate the larger questions of the community of people who are erased from the discoursed of mainstream fiction. Her narratives function as counter-discourse to mainstream discourses that idealize womanhood by identifying it with reductive, self-sacrificing images. Mahasweta's novels and short present many towering and memorable female protagonists like Draupadi, Chandidasi, Rudali and Mary Oraon.

Her imaginary world portrays women both as a victim and a rebel. On one side characters like Doulati, Chandi, Jashoda and Lachhima bear the brunt of caste, class and gender discrimination and are subjected to various forms of socio-economic exploitation. These women symbolize in their life the misery and wretchedness of the subaltern women in Indian society. On the other side, female protagonists like Draupadi, Sanichari, Mary Oraon and Dhouli exhibit exemplary courage and moral strength even in the face of a hostile climate of shifting conventions. They seldom accept defect and try to mainstream their integrity as human beings under all odds. What is remarkable about these heroines is their capacity to absorb that society gives them. They rise to the occasion and seize every opportunity to take revenge and defy conventional norms and values. The life stories of Draupadi, Rudali and Mary Oraon seek to show that how these sensitive individuals grow into hardcore insurgents by breaking down

all the boundaries which are devised by the vested interests of the society to strip these women of their right to live a life of an equal human being.

These women endeavor to break of the vicious circle of passive acceptance of 'Karma' in one-way or the other. That they try and decide to struggle and give a fight is no small achievement. In spite of mammoth difficulties, which these women face in confronting stupendous hardships, their vigor and vitality remain undimmed and unexhausted. Women like Draupadi and Sanichari are intelligent enough to see that though there may not be any viable solutions to their problems, but by raising their voice in their own peculiar ways they set examples of revolt against sexual or any other kind of abuse. Women are mainly weak to injustice and exploitation because that are too timid and submissive. But Mahasweta emphatically views that women should voice their protest loudly as and when the situation demands and struggle for their emancipation. She contends that women should not be passive and submissive. They should be aware of the fact that their own existence is meaningful; their suffering is imposed. At the same time they should have firm conviction in their own potential to reshape their lives. Only then the milieu can be transformed and a new hesitant, withdrawn and silent.

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